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# The American Institute of Sacred Literature

## A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE ON THE APOSTOLIC AGE

*The investigations of recent scholarship have greatly increased the extent and richness of the contribution of the Old Testament to modern religious life; they have brought valuable contributions to our knowledge of Jesus and an understanding of his message. What have they contributed to our ability adequately to estimate the relation of the thought of leaders of the early church to modern Christianity? For several successive months PROFESSOR GEORGE HOLLEY GILBERT will outline a course of reading on this topic and will discuss some of the best and most recent contributions of scholars to it. Questions for consideration should be addressed to the editors of the BIBLICAL WORLD; inquiries concerning traveling libraries containing the books of the course to the AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE, The University of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.<sup>1</sup>*

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of a careful study of the Apostolic age is at least two-fold: first, it helps us to understand Jesus, and second, it helps us to measure the historical value of our modern Christianity. It contributes to our knowledge of Jesus especially by making us acquainted with the first impression of his career and teaching on the religious and social life of Jews and gentiles. This impression has unique significance, not only because of its antiquity, but also because it was made by personal contact and not by a written word. Again, study of the Apostolic age helps to an appraisal of our own present Christianity. We should not regard the interpretation of Christ in the Apostolic age as an eternal standard. Modern investigation shows most clearly that this view would be wholly unjustifiable. But though not an infallible standard, that interpretation, by virtue of the fact that those who made it were near to the era of Jesus, not only in time, but also in their general conceptions of God and the world, has peculiar value for the student of modern Christianity and will have for future generations.

<sup>1</sup> All readers in this course are requested to see that their names are enrolled as members of the Professional Reading Guild at the office of the Institute.

There are all sorts of problems connected with the study of the Apostolic age—textual, historical, archaeological—problems that are being solved and problems that may always remain unsolved. There are problems that affect our understanding of the Apostolic age in a very direct manner, as, for example, those which are connected with the origin and character of Acts, and there are other problems that affect our understanding of that age in a manner somewhat indirect, as, for example, the relation of the Fourth Gospel to the historical facts of the life of Jesus. Some of these numerous and diverse problems we shall meet in the present course of study and we shall consider them in the light of recent investigation.

The Course will concentrate attention on the following topics:

- I. (a) The Sources of Acts  
(b) The Founding of the Church
- II. The Spread of Christianity in the Apostolic Age
- III. Christian Life in the Apostolic Age
- IV. Doctrine in the Apostolic Age.

#### BOOKS REQUIRED IN THIS COURSE

Harnack, *The Acts of the Apostles*  
 Bacon, *The Founding of the Church*  
 Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity*  
 Dobschütz, *Christian Life in the Primitive Church*  
 Weinle, *St. Paul: The Man and His Work*

#### BOOKS RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING

Ropes, *The Apostolic Age in the Light of Modern Criticism*  
 McGiffert, *The Apostolic Age*  
 Gilbert, *Christianity in the Apostolic Age*  
 Wrede, *Paul*  
 Meyer, *Jesus or Paul*  
 Weiss, *Paul and Jesus*

#### I. (a) THE SOURCES OF ACTS

In the study of Harnack's view of the sources of Acts it is to be borne in mind that he regards Luke as the author of the book. The arguments for this conclusion are set forth in his *Luke the Physician*. An integral part of the view that Luke wrote Acts is that the "we-sections" of the book are based on his own notes. But, as a companion of Paul in those periods of his missionary life which are covered by the "we-sections," Luke the author of Acts need not be supposed to have had sources for the second half of his book (16:6 onward) other than the statements of eye-

witnesses together with his own experiences. It is admitted to be possible that there are some interpolations in the second half of Acts (e.g., 16:24-34; 18:8, 9, 10, 24-28) and that an occasional passage, as 18:5-17 and 18:19-23, may be an abbreviation of some written source, but these possibilities do not affect the general conclusion.

Harnack's study of the sources of Acts is therefore essentially a study of the first half of the book. This part is however of fundamental importance in its bearing on the primitive Christian movement.

The investigation starts from the scenes and the persons around which the narrative centers. All attempts to arrive at an analysis of the sources through study of the vocabulary and style of the writing are, in Harnack's judgment, futile. The linguistic uniformity of Acts is too deep and wide to allow any safe results by this method of procedure. It is of course not denied that there are differences of style and vocabulary between the first chapters of Acts and the second part of the book, but it is held that these differences, which are never as significant as the resemblances between the same parts, may be artistic in their nature—differences which are quite explicable in the light of our knowledge of the literary ability of the author.

A cursory survey of the scenes in the first part of Acts would lead us to the conclusion that most of it rests on tradition connected with Jerusalem. This city is the chief scene of the first eight chapters, and though in later chapters the scene may be at a distance from Jerusalem the actors in some of those scenes belong in Jerusalem (e.g., 9:32-11:18) and the activity described in others emanated from the capital (e.g., 11:19-30). But closer examination shows that this view must be seriously modified. Thus the passage 13:1-14:28 and also 15:1-35, both of which begin and end in Antioch, are rather to be regarded as Antiochian tradition. Such details concerning the church in Antioch and the missionary work there as are found in 13:1 and 15:1-2, 30-35 are quite in harmony with this conclusion.

But the first of these passages points back to 12:25, for in that passage it is not said to what place Paul and Barnabas "returned," and still farther back to 11:27-30, because the prophets and teachers in Antioch are set over against those who had come down from Jerusalem (this is the significance of the clause "in the church which was *there*"). Again, the passage 11:27-30, which has to do with Christian prophets and their activity in Antioch, presupposes the section 11:19-26 in which a wave of missionary activity that was started by the persecution in Jerusalem is followed until it reaches Antioch. Special confirmation

of the view that this passage should be considered a part of the Antiochian tradition is found in the fact that the name "Christians" originated there. But 11:19 seems to be a resumption of the narrative begun in 8:1, 4. Members of the same group of people who there entered into missionary work are the subject of the narrative in 11:19-26.

When we look still farther back for material belonging to the Antiochian tradition, we are obliged to include the passage 6:1-6. A suggestive hint of the origin of this section is found in the fact that while six of the seven men mentioned in 6:5 are simply named, Nicolas is described as a *proselyte of Antioch*. Moreover the fact that Hellenists are here introduced in controversy with Hebrews is in a sense a preparation for the reference to Hellenists in 11:20. Of greater weight is the obvious logical connection between the election of the Seven and the evangelistic movement which in 11:20 reaches the city of Antioch. For through the vigorous preaching of one of the Seven the Hellenistic Jews were stirred to persecuting zeal and from that came the dispersion of many Christians from Jerusalem, one group of whom brought the gospel to Antioch.

Thus Harnack finds in chaps. 6-15 a large and homogeneous mass of material which by its constant direction toward the Syrian capital and by the close connection of the earlier parts with the later, whose source seems obvious, justifies us in regarding it as Antiochian tradition. Whether this tradition reached Luke in a written form or orally we will leave at one side for the present.

We turn to the remaining chapters of the first half of Acts (chaps. 1-5; 8:5-11:18; 12:1-24). Here we cannot reach definite results from the clew afforded by the respective scenes of the narrative. There are indeed certain statements which point to a Caesarean tradition (e.g., 8:40; 9:30), but only by an investigation of the chief personalities of these sections are we able to recognize their sources.

Peter is central in the Jerusalem traditions of 1-5, and the Jerusalem-Caesarea traditions (8:5-40; 9:29-11:18; 12:1-24) fall into two divisions, of which the larger has Peter as its center and the smaller has Philip. This second group of passages is regarded as homogeneous. The style is the same, and the parts are bound together by similar traits. But the first section (chaps. 2-5) is not homogeneous. Chap. 2 and 5:17-42 are disturbing elements.

We reach here an exceedingly important point in Harnack's analysis and must consider it somewhat fully. It is pointed out that in 3-5:16 we have a consistent and logical narrative. It begins with the first

recorded miracle of an apostle, out of which came Peter's sermon. The sermon and miracle led to the arrest and trial of the apostles. Their release and return to the brethren caused thanksgiving to God, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a higher ethical life of the brethren, and an increased authority of the apostles, especially of Peter. This section (called A, the Jerusalem-Caesarea source) is continued in 8:5-40, 9:31-11:18, and 12:1-24. Now when we put by the side of this narrative that of chap. 2 and 5:17-42 we note a striking agreement in matter and an equally remarkable contrast in form. Thus there is here an outpouring of the Spirit, followed by a sermon of Peter. Then various consequences of the miracle and the sermon are described. The apostles are imprisoned, tried, scourged, and released. The section closes with a reference to their continued teaching.

This section is regarded as a doublet of the first, a later and much inferior recension of the same material. Its inferiority is evidenced in the fact that there is no clear motive either for the outpouring of the Spirit or for the subsequent events. In the other narrative the miraculous healing is the direct cause of all the following history.

Thus Harnack sees the actual Pentecost in the event of 4:31. The Pentecost of chap. 2 is a legendary development based on that historical fact.

The three main sources of the first half of Acts are therefore the Jerusalem-Caesarean, B (which is a recension of the first part of that), and the Jerusalem-Antiochian. Chap. 1 is relegated to a footnote. Its first part—the account of the Ascension—is regarded as belonging to the very latest tradition in Acts, and its second part—the choice of Matthias—shows no clear relationship to any other material in Acts. 9:1-28 is held to be a separate tradition, possibly based on information which Luke had from Paul himself.

As to the historical value of these various sources Harnack's judgment may be summarized in a few words. The Jerusalem-Caesarea tradition, though not unaffected by legend, is trustworthy in the main. It is plausibly conjectured that Philip or Philip and his daughters may have been the source of this tradition. The material designated as B is regarded as possessing little historical value. It is the latest and least credible part of the book. But the large Jerusalem-Antioch tradition has a high historical value. It is conjectured that it rests on material derived from Silas.

The old problem of the relation of Acts, chap. 15, to the Epistles of Paul does not lessen Harnack's estimate of the value of this section, for

he now believes that this problem can be solved in a manner which brings the Apostolic Decree into full harmony with Paul's attitude toward gentile Christians. He abandons his earlier view (1899) that the *original* recension of that decree prohibited certain foods, and holds, on the contrary, that the other recension (that of Codex D and the western Fathers), according to which the decree was a summary of Jewish ethics, was the original. He agrees with Wellhausen that the decree included only three, not four, prohibitions. The word "strangled" is regarded as a gloss. The three prohibitions concerned idolatry, murder, and fornication. These were the "necessary things" from which the gentile converts were to keep themselves. On this interpretation of the decree, it is not remarkable that the Epistle to the Galatians is silent regarding it.

Whether these three main sources of the first half of Acts were in part written or entirely oral Harnack is unable to decide. He regards it as probable that Luke in working up the Jerusalem-Caesarea tradition, especially chaps. 3, 4, and 12, depended upon a written document (Aramaic rather than Greek), and he regards it as slightly more probable, though by no means certain, that Luke received from Silas some written notes as well as much oral information as the bases of those passages which constitute the Jerusalem-Antioch tradition.

In concluding this analysis of Harnack's view of the sources of Acts, the following remarks may be made. In the first place, the results reached by him are confirmatory of the essential trustworthiness of Acts. Even the negative judgment on the historical worth of B can hardly be said to affect the fundamental content of the book. To this extent Harnack's investigation is in accord with the conclusion of some other recent scholars.

Second, the analysis of chap. 2 and 5:17-42 forces us to the conclusion that Luke, though known to have been a careful writer, was not greatly endowed with critical power, that indeed he was more deeply impressed by the effectiveness of a story than by its historical probability.

Third, the discovery of a Jerusalem-Caesarea and a Jerusalem-Antioch source in the first half of Acts gains much support from the conjecture that Philip, or Philip with his daughters, and Silas were the channels through which Luke came into possession of these traditions.

Fourth, Harnack's analysis of the sources strengthens the view that the author's aim in the book was to show how the Gospel passed over from the Jew to the gentile. It was not to give memorabilia of the apostles or a sketch of the missionary career of Paul.

## (b) THE FOUNDING OF THE CHURCH

To the question, When was the church founded? one may reply with the counter question, What do you mean by "church"? If we mean the company of those who were attached as disciples to Jesus, who believed in him and loved him, then obviously the church was founded in the life of Jesus, as he gathered loyal followers around him. If, however, we mean the "emergence of the Christian brotherhood into a consciousness of its separate existence and mission to the world," then, according to Professor Bacon, we must find the foundation of the church in the "turning again" of Simon Peter, i.e., in his faith that Jesus was living and glorified.

"The church," says our author, "had an *unconscious* life while Jesus was with them in the flesh." He had no idea of founding what we mean by the church. This term is indeed attributed to Jesus in Matthew, but in an element of the book which is latest in origin and which has the least claim to authenticity. But Jesus founded a "brotherhood," with certain rites and observances, and it was this brotherhood which developed into the church through its loyalty to the rejected and crucified Jesus. The critical moment of this development was that when the risen Lord appeared to Cephas.

The importance of this manifestation to Peter has almost entirely disappeared from the Gospels. It is apparent in Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians, and on close examination certain hints of it are found in the gospel narrative. The story was purposely overlaid with the concrete and tangible appearances of Jesus and at last was virtually lost out of the consciousness of the church. This was due in part to the greater impressiveness of an empty tomb and physical manifestations, in part also to the church's pride in its great apostles and its consequent desire to represent them as promptly and unitedly entering upon the fulfilment of the Great Commission.

The manifestation of the risen Lord to Peter is regarded, on the basis of Paul's testimony, as having been spiritual in character, a revelation of the Son *in* him. Its scene was doubtless the Lake of Galilee whither Peter and the other apostles had fled. To this locality we are turned by the story in the Appendix of the Fourth Gospel and also by Luke 5:1-11, which is regarded as based on the appearance of the risen Lord to Peter.

When we seek to come somewhat nearer to the real content of Peter's experience we are again referred to Paul's epistles. We there learn that the watchword of the common faith was the confession of Jesus as *Lord*



(e.g., Rom. 10:9; I Cor. 12:3; II Cor. 4:5-6). With this agrees the story of Luke in Acts when we look past its "idealizations" to the essential elements. In Peter's quotations from Scripture it is the Lordship of Jesus which is sought to be established. In the apostle's thought the Servant whom God had raised up unto Israel had now by the resurrection and by the phenomena of Pentecost been "made both Lord and Christ." The essential content of this faith was not a belief in the "mere revivification of an inanimate body." It was something more and different: it was the belief that he was *glorified*, that he was seated at the right hand of God, whence he should come again as the promised Christ.

And the content of this faith was the content of the gospel. "The gospel began with the resurrection." Paul and even the Galilean disciples regarded the life of Jesus as preliminary to the gospel. It was no doubt fundamental for the disciples, because the disciple *is* a disciple by virtue of an imitation of God like that of Jesus. The "complete gospel" includes that exemplification of the principle of self-denying service which we see in the life and teaching of Jesus. Still more strongly is this thought expressed when it is said that Jesus *was* the gospel, "both by revealing the truth and by conveying the life."

Intimately bound up with this view of the Lordship of Jesus is the belief that Jesus did not, even in the last weeks of his life, assume the rôle of Messiah. If he laid any claim to this title, it was only in a figurative or ethical sense. He fulfilled Israel's call to be God's "son." The title "Son of Man" is one of the "earliest embodiments of faith in the risen Jesus." That is to say, it was not chosen by Jesus as a self-designation. It is assumed that this title means the "judge and ruler of the world," and it is held that only after the resurrection was this function ascribed to Jesus.

To complete the survey of the founding of the church it is needful to consider its primitive institutions. These, according to Paul, were two—baptism and the breaking of bread. Baptism was not imposed by the authority of Christ, and therefore Matt. 28:19 and Mark 16:16 cannot be understood as words of Jesus. Yet it is thought to have been an initiatory rite from the very beginning. It was adopted as the seal of the forgiveness of sins. It was this in the ministry of John the Baptist, and therefore had the sanction of Jesus. It gained a new meaning with Pentecost. Thereafter baptism was not regarded as genuine save when it was followed by "gifts of the Spirit." This constituted the difference between the baptism of John and Christian baptism.

There is thought to be no reason why the rite of baptism may not

have been introduced at Pentecost. That day, and not the day of the resurrection, is regarded as the foundation of the observance of the "first day of the week." This observance existed long before the story of the empty tomb originated.

The rite of "breaking bread" is supposed to rest on the common meal of Jesus and his disciples in Galilee. This was perpetuated in the daily *Agapé*, which appears in the early church. But with this fraternal meal was associated a memorial act which Paul declares to have been instituted by Jesus on the night of his betrayal. This act, which in the intention of Jesus was simply a memorial, received a mystic sense from Paul, derived from his own experience. For him it was a sacrament.

With this sketch of the founding of the church the present writer confesses himself to be in large measure in hearty agreement. There are however some points at which he would ask those who are following this course on the Apostolic age to consider whether the author's view is well sustained and satisfactory.

First, are we justified in holding that Paul and even the Galilean disciples regarded the earthly life of Jesus as *preliminary* to the gospel? Is not this to give a greatly exaggerated significance to the manifestation of the risen Lord to Peter, Paul, and the others? Is it not to look at the matter from Peter's point of view rather than from that of Jesus? Is it not virtually to exalt a spiritual experience of Peter above the life and teaching of his Master? Which event was of absolutely fundamental importance, Peter's "turning again" or that personal power which Jesus had exerted upon him by word and example by virtue of which he was irresistibly led to "turn again"? When we speak of the life and teaching of Jesus as *preliminary* to the gospel, we find the essence of the gospel in Peter's or Paul's message about Jesus. Should we not rather find its essence in Jesus' revelation of the Father?

Second, does the admission that the heavenly Lordship of Jesus was the essence of primitive faith—a Lordship realized after the resurrection—require us to hold that Jesus did not claim to be the Messiah, or that he did not call himself the Son of Man? Have not both these claims a large and substantial support in the gospel narrative? If the title "Son of Man" is an early "embodiment of faith in the risen Jesus," how does it happen that with the exception of a single passage in Acts it is found only in the words of Jesus? And if they who first applied this title to Jesus wished thereby to identify him with the Judge of the world, how does it happen that the significance of the term in the Gospel narrative is so indeterminate?

Third, is there any good and sufficient ground for identifying the "breaking of bread" with the *Agapé*? Does not the conjecture that Jesus founded a brotherhood "with certain rites and observances" have against it the great weight of the known method of Jesus which was thoroughly spiritual? Does not the use of the phrase "breaking bread" in Acts and I Corinthians indicate clearly that it was something unique and religious in character rather than a common meal?

